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ABSTRACT

The existence of subgroupings among runaways and whether or not there are particular characteristics that can be associated with the subgroups was investigated with 308 adolescents whose records were chosen from a runaway housing program. Ss referrals were reviewed and inventoried into three areas: runaways, castaways, and agency assists. Among findings were that of the 308 Ss studied only 30% met the National Center for Health Statistics definition for runaways (which involves leaving or staying away from home on purpose). The remainder were classified as either castaways (24% of the youth did not willingly leave home but were placed out of their homes by the parents and then reported as runaways by police or parents) or agency assists (46% were youth placed out of their home by an agency). The last two catagories suggest that parental abandonment and inadequate community aftercare facilities are a large part of the "runaway" problem. (PHR)

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Runaway: Reality or Myth

by

Thomas P. Gullotta

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

This paper studies a four year history of a large volunteer shelter program for runaway children. It examines the cases of the youngsters referred to that program and suggests that distinct subgroups exist questioning whether the word runaway accurately describes the situations of many youth.

"Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely... It's lovely to live on a raft."

Huck Finn

This rather idealized version of free living is a thread which weaves its way through American literature and the minds of the American public. Tom Sawyer's adventures with Injun Joe, the glamor of the Barnum and Bailey circus tents, Hemingway's semibiographical portrait of Nick Adams' silent resolution of a young man's problems have shaped American thought toward the runaway. The deterioration of these dreams into the harsher realities of youngsters brutalized and victimized by the forces surrounding them is relatively recent.

A review of the literature on runaways indicates that emphasis has been

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placed on explaining and describing the runaway phenomenon. Robey 1904, Shellow et al., 1967, Spectar 1968, Kimball 1970, Kinloch 1970, and Ambrosino 1971, have focused their attentions on family and individual characteristics. Collectively, their studies view the home environment as a frustrating place creating stressful situations for the family members. Other work by Washton 1974, Zastrow and Navarre 1975, and Justice and Duncan 1976, have focused attention on programs and services to assist runaway youth, while Dunford and Brennan 1970, have focused their efforts on the multidimensionality of the activity and towards the construction of a typology of runaway youth. Despite these efforts, no attention has been paid as to whether subgroupings exist within the context of the term runaway and whether there are particular characteristics that can be associated with these subgroups - should they exist.

Population:

Subjects were selected from the first and largest runaway housing program established in an Eastern Seaboard State. Serving the Capital and surrounding area (population 600,000), this program was the primary housing source for runaway youth between the years 1972-1976. Three hundred and eight subjects were randomly chosen from the records of this program for whom complete information was available.

Method:

In order to test whether runaway subgroupings existed, three hundred and eight subjects (134 males, 184 females) representing three hundred and eighty-five separate referrals were reviewed and inventoried into three areas: 1. the nature of the referral; 2. the actions precipitating the referral; and 3. the referral source.

Running away was operationally defined using the National Center for Health Statistics definition describing that behavior as, "leaving or staying away on purpose, knowing you would be missed, intending to stay away from home at least for some time".[1]

To inventory the precipitating actions leading to a runaway a sixteen item checklist was devised listing the circumstances leading to such behavior.

Findings:

Of the three-hundred and eight youngsters whose files were studied, only ninety-two or 30% met the National Center for Health Statistics definition for runaways.

Two other groupings emerged from examing the nature of the referrals.

Table I

The category castaways reflected those youth who did not willingly choose to leave home but for whatever reasons were placed out of their homes by the parents and were then reported by either their parents or the police as runaways.

The category agency assist, reflected the help given another agency in placing or housing a youngster temporarily pending some other action.

Demographic, Source, and Precipitating Circumstances

Runaways:

The average age of youngsters running away was 14.6 years. For boys it was 14.8 years, and for girls it was 14.4 years.

[1]Plan and Operation of a Health Examination Survey of United States Youths 12-17 years of Age. Vital & Health Statistics. PHS Publications No. 1000 - Series 11, No. 8. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969.

The circumstances leading a youngster to leave home most frequently involved a family disturbance centering around specific parental control issues such as parental disapproval of boyfriend/girlfriend, school issues, grooming, dress and behavior.

Table II

The primary source of referrals was community sources 40%, juvenile court 34%, police departments 17%, agencies 9%.

Castaway:

The average age of a youngster placed out of their home was 15.35 (boys 15.8, girls 14.9).

Table III

The unusually high reported incest percentage under closer examination reveals 4 cases of parental child sexual relations occurring involving 3 girls age 14 and 1 age 13. Abuse was present in 2 cases. Alcoholism in the parents present in 1 situation.

Sources of referral were the community 44%, juvenile court 20%, police 18% and agencies 18%.

Agency Assistance:

The average age of youngsters in the agency assistance category was 15 (boys 15.2, girls 14.9).

Table IV

The Category reflects in its own way the unique circumstances surrounding it. Temporary placements affected 32% of the population. Only 17 of the 142 youth in this category had every run away. In particular the request for after care facilities to home recently discharge emotionally ill patients was apparent.

Sources of referral were agencies 59%, juvenile court 31% and police 10%.

Discussion:

In one respect this paper substantiates the work of earlier research in profiling the demographic and precipitating circumstances which caused youngsters to leave home. In another sense, however, the findings that at least one definite subgrouping exists, questions the looseness in which the term runaway has been applied. While the term "runaway" has been applied in a manner to place the onus of responsibility upon a youngster's actions, it has neglected giving equal attention to parental abandonment. Finally the surprisingly large use of this program by agencies raises certain issues. The failure of some private and state agencies to successfully place youngsters after as many as 35 placements, the inadequacy of community aftercare facilities for the soon to be discharged patient from mental institutions raise important social policy questions of society's committment to its needy.

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Table I

Nature of Referral

	Boy	Girl	Total	%
Runaway	36	56	92	30
Castaway	32	42	74	24
Agency assist	66	76	142	46

Table II

Precipitating Circumstances - Runaways

	Boys	%	Girls	%
Incest	0	0	2	4
Drug	3	8	4	7
Status Offense	8	22	16	29
Non-status Offense	2	5	2	4
Abuse	4	11	7	12
Custody Battle	0	0	0	0
Parent/Alcoholic	2	5	1	2
Miscellaneous	17	47	19	34
Family Breakdowns	4	11	7	12
Behavior	4	11	4	7
Curfew	1	3	8	14
Pregnant	0	0	6	11
Grooming	1	3	1	2
Boy/Girl	2	5	4	7
School	3	8	5	9
Unwanted/foster/adopted	1	3	2	4

Table III

Precipitating Circumstances - Castaways

	Boys	%	Girls	%
Incest	0	0	4	9
Drug	7	22	3	7
Status Offense	2	6	6	14
Non-Status Offense	2	6	1	2
Abuse	3	9	9	21
Custody Battle	0	0	1	2
Parents/Alcoholic	0	0	1	2
Miscellaneous	11	34	16	38
Family Breakdowns	4	12	10	24
Behavior	10	31	4	9
Curfew	0	0	3	7
Pregnant	0	0	7	16
Grooming	0	0	0	0
Boy/Girl	1	3	2	5
School	0	0	0	0
Unwanted/foster/adopted	3	9	1	2

Table IV

Precipitating Circumstances - Agency Assistance

	Boys	%	Girls	%
Incest	0	0	1	1
Drugs	5	7	10	15
Status Offense	9	12	12	18
Non-Status Offense	15	20	3	4
Abuse	14	18	13	20
Custody Battle	1	1	4	6
Parents/Alcoholic	3	4	11	17
Miscellaneous	34	45	36	54
Family Breakdowns	6	8	12	18
Behavior	1	1	2	3
Curfew	2	3	4	6
Pregnant	0	0	2	3
Grooming	0	0	0	0
Boy/Girl	0	0	1	1
School	1	1	2	3
Unwanted/foster/adopted	3	4	4	6